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Costa Rica Investigates Illegal Sale of Visas to Cuban Immigrants

by LADB Staff

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Police investigators announced in April the arrest of a former cabinet minister and several others allegedly involved in the illegal sale of humanitarian visas to Cuban immigrants. Also under investigation in the scandal are congressional deputies and the Costa Rican Interests Section in Havana. Agents of the Organismo de Investigacion Judicial (OIJ) began their investigation in January when an immigration document bearing the forged signature of Public Security Minister Laura Chinchilla was found in the law offices of former public security minister Juan Jose Echeverria.

On April 15, the OIJ arrested Echeverria and his three sons, Juan Jose, Carlos, and Roberto, along with Mercedes Bevacqua, director of the Public Security Ministry's immigration division. Also detained were Echeverria's secretary, Sara Flores, former public ministry official Jose Peralta, former immigration official Jorge Alfaro Bolanos, and Ricardo Hernandez, a Cuban national. Peralta, Bolanos, and Hernandez are founders of the National Committee of Churches, which was set up to help procure humanitarian visas from the Costa Rican government using funds from the Cuban exile community in Miami.

Charges against the group include fraud, influence peddling, and illegal issuance of government documents. The group is accused of selling humanitarian visas to Cubans for between US\$5,000 and US\$7,000 each. Under law, the visas are supposed to be issued free. Attorney General Carlos Arias was unable to determine how much money was made from the operation, but he said that in the last few years between 5,000 and 9,000 Cubans have immigrated. The visas apparently were bought for Cubans who did not qualify for residence status in Costa Rica on political grounds.

Church, government officials helped get visas

Investigators said Echeverria and his sons all of whom are lawyers sold the documents out of their law offices, often using letters of recommendation signed by church officials and others to support the visa applications. Roman Arrieta, archbishop of San Jose, said he signed many of the letters at the request of the Cuban Catholic Church. He said he was unaware that the visas were being sold and said he had been duped.

Besides documents with Chinchilla's forged signature, investigators found falsified marriage certificates in Echeverria's law offices, indicating that the lawyers had arranged fake marriages with Costa Rican citizens to establish justification for humanitarian visas. As many as 400 visas were issued based on fake marriages, said investigators. The OIJ is also looking into whether two Legislative Assembly deputies who also signed letters might have been involved in the conspiracy. Arias said Cubans living in Miami furnished as much as US\$200,000 to pay for visas. OIJ agents are investigating the Interest Section in Havana, where arrangements were made for the exit of Cubans who were to receive visas.

Echeverria has denied any wrongdoing and said that high-level officials, including Chinchilla and President Jose Maria Figueres, approved of the manner in which he procured the visas. He also argued that fees collected for the visas were fair and permitted by law. "Not one [visa] is illegal," he said. Echeverria related one case last November in which he asked the president to authorize admittance of a Cuban family, and "he immediately gave the order to authorize the visas."

Public Security Minister Chinchilla temporarily suspended issuance of humanitarian visas to Cubans and asked the National Immigration Board to tighten eligibility rules for granting visas on grounds of family reunification. Investigations underway in other immigration irregularities On the heels of the Cuban case, judicial authorities began investigating commercial visas issued to Chinese nationals from Hong Kong during the last six years. Some of these visas are suspected of having been issued fraudulently, though no connection has been made to the scheme for securing Cuban visas.

In a related matter, Labor Minister Farid Ayales resigned April 23, after being charged in connection with the issuance of seasonal work permits to hundreds of Nicaraguan immigrants. Ayales issued the ministry cards through a private agency, Fundacion para el Desarrollo Humano en Centroamerica (FUNDEHCA), which charged US\$20 for each card. Associates of Ayales and one of his sons are connected with FUNDEHCA. Ayales denied any wrongdoing and said he was resigning to defend his name. [Sources: Notimex, 04/16/98; Xinhua, 04/23/98; Tico Times (Costa Rica), 04/17/98, 04/24/98; La Nacion (Costa Rica), 04/16/98, 04/17/98, 04/19/98, 04/21/98, 04/23/98, 05/02/98]

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